

ON THE HOTEL VERANDA

BY DOROTHY CANFIELD

AUTHOR OF "A VILLAGE MUNCHAUSEN," "A MAN OF IDEAS," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY HORACE TAYLOR

THE invalid whose hours were regulated for him by the doctor was already out on the veranda. He was pounced upon by the first of the matrons, who later rocked in a long line, distilling slow scandal over their fancy-work.

"Oh, Mr. Mallory, were you here when they went by to the drawing of the nets? Which girl did Elliott Whiteley take?"

He lent himself to her rapacious curiosity with the patience which his enforced sojourn among the knitters and gossipers had taught him. She turned to greet another arrival triumphantly.

"What did I tell you? Mr. Mallory says young Mr. Whiteley was with Miss Piccelli this morning!"

The other established herself in a rocking-chair near Mallory, and took out her crocheting.

"Well, he took Helen Mason to the dance last night, anyhow. And his mother told me he spoke particularly about not liking girls to be so loud in their dress as some here."

"Did she think he meant—"

"Of course he meant Miss Piccelli's red bathing-suit."

"But he's always in swimming with her!"

"That's because Helen Mason won't do horrid, conspicuous things like diving from the end of the pier. Hush! Here comes Mrs. Whiteley."

There was a moment's silence as the anxious-eyed woman with a black knit shawl over her shoulders approached them. She greeted Mallory, inquired for his health with the conscientiousness due to a distant relationship, and passed on to the two beyond.

"Oh, I know he's with Miss Piccelli again this morning," she sighed, sinking into a chair and beginning to rock to and fro. "And I went to bed *so* peaceful last night, thinking that after taking Helen Mason to the dance—" Her flat little voice sharpened into impatience. "Helen can't have *any* enterprise, or she'd have made an engagement with him then to take her somewhere this morning. When you've got a girl like that against you—and there's no use talking, men *like* that kind of a girl! Oh!" She had a shuddering vision of the future's possibilities. "Will you try to imagine poor Elliott's taking that flaunting, foreign, untidy creature into his first parish as the wife of the new rector?"

The complete insignificance to which his ill-health had reduced him was in no way more forcibly brought home to Mallory than by the carelessness with which the matrons most interested in the little drama discussed its development, morning after morning, in his presence. To them he was not a man, but an invalid; just as in the afternoons, when the young actors in the drama were accustomed to drop down by his chair and talk about themselves, he felt that their confidences came from their sense of the impassable barrier which lay between their youth and strength and his sickly middle age. He was beyond feeling any bitterness at this relegation to the ranks of those who do not count. He had expended all his bitterness in the year of misery which had followed his physical collapse in the midst of half-finished plans and hot ambitions. He had attained, by now, a sort of apathy as to his fate. At moments he had glimpses of a still further achievement in resignation, when he might cease

regretting so sorely the great works he had planned, and from which he was now cut off, and might come to be thankful that the profession of letters is one in which even a broken-down invalid may still do the odd jobs and pick up a scanty living.

He had, however, not come to that yet. The best he could manage was to feel utterly remote from the stirring world of well and strong people, and to observe with a melancholy smile that the feeling was entirely reciprocal. His life at present was symbolical of all his future. He sat apart and watched from an incalculable distance the sports, the love-makings, the pleasures of others, his isolation enlivened only by the buzz of old women's talk.

After a time he saw Elliott Whiteley approaching. With an ironic smile at his rôle as announcer of the main events in the pantomime, he called the attention of his neighbors to the fact that the handsome young fellow was with Helen Mason. They bounded in their chairs with surprise, and one of them cried to Mrs. Whiteley:

"Well, *now* how about Helen's being so slow?"

The two passed the veranda, turning their young faces, bright with exercise and the sea-breeze for a momentary greeting to their observant elders. The girl's starched white skirt cracked in the wind like a flag, and she put up a brown hand to catch at her stiff sailor as it tilted sharply to a gust. Sitting in the breathless quiet of the sheltered veranda, Mallory was pricked even through his listlessness by unresigned envy at the sight of

these two young creatures struggling against the boisterous wind.

A moment later a stout, masterful woman came heavily up the steps and joined the group on the veranda. She looked very red and triumphant.

"Did you see that?" She waved her hand after the disappearing couple. "I got Helen aside on the pier, and I told her she'd just got to do something! I said when I was a girl I wouldn't have stood another girl's snatching away my young man like that. The Piccelli's hair was coming down, of course, and she was off in a corner putting it up. I told Helen now was her chance, and if she couldn't fix things so that Elliott would be with her the rest of the morning it would be her own fault. They've gone off to play golf!"

"Dear Mrs. Mason, how can I ever thank you!" Mrs. Whiteley's voice fairly quavered in her gratitude. "If



"WELL, NOW HOW ABOUT HELEN'S BEING SO SLOW?"

there was only something *I* could do! I try to talk to Elliott, but you know how young men are!"

"Oh, yes, you only drive them away if you try to talk them around!"

"So now I just try to influence him—tactfully, without his noticing it, you know. I just drop little hints about what a dreadful hindrance an unsuitable marriage is to any man, and how it *ruins* the career of a young clergyman."

II

MALLORY had overheard some of these carefully tactful conversations between his cousins, mother and son; and although he felt as keenly as any one else the supreme folly of the young minister's liking for the pretty South American, he had said to himself that that kind of talk was enough to drive a man into any folly. He smiled with the faint amusement which the spectacle of life afforded him nowadays, and slipped away into a light doze. When he awoke, the veranda was deserted for the dining-room, whence a distant clatter told him that lunch was in progress.

It was past the time for his usual noonday visitor. With the depressed certainty of a man who feels himself hopelessly unattractive, he decided that the whimsical creature had forgotten him. He sat up with a sigh, and was greeted by a laugh.

"Hush! Here I am, Mr. Mallory. I dropped down here on the floor, where your chair hides me, to wait till you woke up."

He looked down, smiling, at the gleaming amber heap of silken ruffles.

"Why, they wouldn't turn their heads to see whom I was talking to! I'm about as important as the rung to a chair."

She did not deny this estimate of his value, but said, with a laugh like a bird's trill:

"But they would turn a million heads to see whom I am talking to, wouldn't they?"

"Ah, but if they saw you talking to me, they'd look away again. It would be as if they had caught you asleep."

"And they would hurry and tell Helen Mason to clutch at Mr. Whiteley while she had the chance, wouldn't they?"

"Oh, *that's* why you want to keep so carefully hidden, is it?"

There came over the girl a curious change which he had noticed before whenever she was moved. Her emotion, whatever it was, always so overflowed and penetrated her that she seemed to sparkle with it to her finger-tips. She sprang up now, sparkling with resentment.

"No, that is *not* why I want to keep hidden! And I don't want to be hidden, anyhow. What made you think such a horrid thing of me?"

She sat down in the most conspicuous place near him, spreading her bright ruffles to their utmost, and looking angrily askance at him out of long, dark eyes.

"I thought it because you said so," said the invalid, smiling.

"You knew I didn't mean it—not that way!"

"I know there's no reasonableness in you."

"I should hope *not*!" she answered, still breathing hard and compressing her red lips.

The American laughed outright for the first time in months.

"Why, you're like a woman out of a book! It's no wonder you turn the heads of poor young clergymen!"

"Oh, pshaw! Who cares for—"

"Yes, of course," he mocked her. "Who cares for—"

"Mr. Mallory!" She spoke very seriously in a fluting contralto. "If you tease me any more I'll be furious! Anybody would think I was a child!"

"No, only that I am a sick old man."

She did not contradict him, digging at the toe of her high-heeled shoe with the point of a very much ruffled parasol. She ignored his last remark with the innocently cruel absorption of youth in its own affairs, and spoke with a *tremolo* in her voice which was new to him:

"Please, Mr. Mallory, I want to ask you something. I haven't a soul to tell me things but my old great-uncle, and you know he doesn't care what I do so long as I don't bother him. I overheard Mrs. Mason and your cousin, Mrs. Whiteley, talking about me last night. I couldn't get away before I heard a little. Why am I such a dreadful person for



"AFTER A WHOLE MORNING WITH HELEN!"

anybody to like? I'm not a real foreigner—I've always been to school here. I'm an American, if I'm not a Yankee. What's the reason?"

She arched dark eyebrows at him plaintively. Mallory burned with indignation at the poisoned tongues which had reduced her bright, exotic unconsciousness to this pathetic pass, and with alarm at the naïveté of a girl who could thus open her heart to a man and a stranger. He hesitated in desperate uncertainty, feeling himself thrust into the position of father confessor long before he had acquired the wisdom for it; but he was spared further anxiety by the appearance, from the other side, of his young cousin Elliott.

The girl wheeled about and darted away like a dragon-fly down the steps and along the board platform, followed eagerly by the young man.

III

MALLORY, left alone, reflected drearily that fate had rarely arranged a more ironic turn of events than that his correct, unimpassioned, amiable cousin should fall in with the most unsuitable woman in

all the world, and that she should be so irresistibly the kind to take a boy's fancy.

Mrs. Whiteley came out on the veranda, caught sight of the fleeing couple, and sank down dejectedly.

"After a whole morning with Helen!" she wailed.

"Perhaps, if Helen would run away once in a while—" suggested Mallory.

"Oh, she's done *everything*!" said the young man's mother, conscientiously giving the girl her due.

"Miss Piccelli has money in her own right, I hear," he said in sardonic consolation.

"That only makes it all the worse. You can imagine how snippy and independent she would be to any suggestions or advice! Oh, it's *dreadful*! If he does—he'll simply have to give up the ministry!"

Mallory rose to go to his lunch.

"Oh, perhaps people wouldn't think her so queer!" he said.

"A girl who's always overdressed, and never neat! I wonder if she thinks a large, white safety-pin showing below her belt is an ornament? I never saw her without one."

As he lounged along, smiling at this last criticism, Mallory's attention was called to the masterpiece of neatness as to belt and skirt achieved by the lady who was entering the dining-room ahead of him. When he recognized above it the calm profile of Helen Mason, he said aloud:

"Yes, indeed!" she murmured vaguely.

Mallory broke into a somewhat bitter laugh.

"You are *made* to be a minister's wife!" he said.

The girl's clear, tanned skin did not redden.



"OH, COUSIN HORACE, ELLIOTT'S FIRST CALL HAS COME!"

"Oh, of course!"

She turned.

"Oh, it's Mr. Mallory! Let's sit together."

As they unfolded their napkins, Miss Mason remarked:

"How do you feel this morning, Mr. Mallory? I hope the noise of the dance last night didn't keep you awake. I thought about you every time the music was loud."

What was left of Mallory's old, keen, worldly self recognized the perfunctory ring of these phrases, but his invalid soul, starving in the cold depths of isolation, caught greedily at the bare hook. He began to tell her about the curious irregularity of his nights, how sometimes he could not sleep when there was no noise, and yet at other times— He was aware that she was not listening to him, though she looked up brightly when he paused.

"Why, what a funny idea! What ever made you think of such a thing?"

When they had finished, she went out with him to the veranda and helped him to establish himself in his long chair. He thanked her dutifully, although a moment later he was really touched by the wistfulness in her clear eyes as she looked up and down the empty platform. She talked steadily and sensibly about all kinds of subjects, and he was grateful to her when he found that she had made one of his long hours slip by.

At least, he reproached himself for not being more grateful to her, and fell into musing upon the perversity of man, as exemplified not only in young Whiteley's mad flight after foolishly fluttering ruffles when perfectly adjusted belts waited for him at home, but in his own coldness under the thoughtful ministrations of the owner of the belt. In his case it made no difference, but in his cousin's it

meant ruining a promising career and breaking his mother's heart. He did think that, considering all that depended upon Elliott's choice, and the sacrifices his family had made to give him a start, the boy ought to have the manliness to run away from temptation.

IV

IN the long, slow days and weeks which followed, it became more and more apparent that at least half of the young minister's running was in exactly the opposite direction. For Mallory, sitting remote and cheerless in his chair in the sun, the thing went forward like the acts of a play constructed on the French classic principle of having nothing happen on the stage. He saw little of the action, but from the revelations—both intentional and unsuspected—of the actors he gathered that only some slight external event was needed to precipitate the crisis. The young man was silent and moody, and the girls, each according to her temperament, showed the strain.

Both of them seemed to have adopted the invalid as a safe and silent person for their half-expressed, plaintive confidences, and both had insisted that he should dispense with their surnames. It was as "Helen" and "Annunziata," now, that he addressed them in tones which he felt had the true grandfatherly ring. His interest in the outcome of events, apparently so close at hand, grew painful. Annunziata, with her pretty petulances and remorseful penances, her causeless laughter and equally causeless tears, wrung his heart with sympathy; while Helen, paler every day, put on a dignified self-control which made him cry out again that she was created by Providence for the rôle which was being denied her.

One day his doctor electrified him, and made him, for a moment, think of himself again in the way he had so painfully unlearned, by saying that his sojourn by the sea had done wonders for him, and that all he needed to restore him to tolerable health was a keen interest in something.

"Ah, I have that to an extent that keeps me awake nights!" he cried, and lightly sketched the events which were leading up to an unknown dénouement.

"Pshaw!" said the doctor. "You don't want an old woman's interest in something through a telescope. You want to get into a drama of your own!"

Mallory relapsed at once into his usual sardonic melancholy. He looked down at his nerveless hands, and indicated his cavernous eyes and sunken cheeks.

"I've just the get-up of a hero, haven't I, with my empty pockets and romantic aspect?"

"Oh, you're a poet, and that's always romantic."

"I hope to learn to be a philosopher, and that's never romantic."

He found, later, that his philosophizings about the matter foremost in his mind were shared by Mrs. Whiteley, and that she, as well as he, had foreseen the importance of the first external event. She came out to him hurriedly one morning, very pale.

"Oh, Cousin Horace, Elliott's first call has come! It's one of the oldest and most conservative parishes in New England. He leaves to-morrow, so to-day will decide things. Won't you say something to him—advise him?"

Mallory refused in a panic, refused again in anger at her importunity, and finally yielded to her tears.

"It won't do a bit of good, you know," he said.

"Oh, it may *save* him!" broke in Elliott's mother. "And I shall always feel that we did all we could!"

At noon Annunziata bore down on him, sparkling with animation, her cheeks flushed, singing like a lark.

"I've had an inspiration to get you to one of our doings," she cried, "and you mustn't refuse! We're going to have a bonfire party to celebrate poor Mr. Whiteley's going away, and you're to be guest of honor."

"I don't know what a bonfire party is, my dear," he answered.

She swung herself up to the rail of the veranda, and sat twinkling her little feet, her face cast into a pearly shadow by the drooping brim of her white hat, a torn ruffle of her parasol fluttering in the wind like a brisk little flag.

"The bonfire is to be right below the veranda, on the sand, and you can sit and look at us through the railing. You *will* come, won't you?"

"I'll look on as usual," he conceded to her.

She executed a pirouette of exultation, light as thistle-down, and darted away. Mallory sat silently looking out to sea, a grim smile on his lips to feel his heart beating faster. He slowed it down to its usual languid pulse by wondering if her brightness came from an early and decisive interview with Elliott. He decided, suddenly, that under no circumstances would he "speak" to that young man.

Helen Mason came down the veranda, her calm face even paler than usual.

"I suppose of course you're coming to the bonfire party this evening?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she said, with her gentle smile. "We must do all we can to make Mr. Whiteley's last—" To his dismay and her utter confusion, she found that she had overestimated her strength in trying to speak Elliott's name carelessly. Her voice broke, her lips quivered, and the shamed eyes with which she implored his silence before she turned away were full of tears.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Mallory, horror-stricken. He foresaw a relentlessly tragic climax to the summer's drama, no matter how it ended.

He saw none of the three until evening, though tocsins and alarums rang about him all the afternoon. It was variously reported that Whiteley was swimming with Annunziata, that he was playing golf with Helen, and there was even a wild rumor that he had taken them both out canoeing on the inlet. It was an exciting afternoon. Mallory alternately decided to keep his promise to Mrs. Whiteley and to break it. As he swung violently from one to another of these conflicting decisions, he was quite tired out when evening came, and sat on the veranda deserted by every one else, drooping and depressed.

Elliott took the seat beside him with a murmur of greeting, and leaned back in silence. Apparently the day had tired him, too. Finally he said, with a little embarrassment:

"Ah—er—there is something I have to tell you. Helen wanted you to know, though it is to be a secret from everybody else for a while yet, she says. We're engaged, Helen and I—just since this afternoon."

"My dear fellow!" cried Mallory, his heart hammering in his throat, "congratulations, a thousand times congratulations! You have a pearl. But see here, you must persuade Helen to let



"YOU CAN SIT AND LOOK AT US THROUGH THE RAILING."

you tell your poor mother at once."

"Why 'poor'?" queried her son.

"Don't you realize how distractedly anxious she has been about you?"

"Anxious?"

The intonation rang false to Mallory's ear.

"Oh; come, you know as well as anybody that she's been half-crazy for fear you would lose your head about Annunziata Piccelli."

The young man spoke with a grave note of shocked surprise and injured pride:

"She didn't think I was *serious* about that, did she?"

"I'd like to know how she could think anything else!" Mallory amazed himself by the sudden heat with which he answered.

"You've done nothing all summer but—"

"Why, I should think anybody who knew me could have told that I was just amused by her bright, odd ways, that's all—a little harmless summer pleasure. How could I be so foolish, so insane, as to think of putting such a childish, undisciplined, volatile creature into the grave responsibilities and sacred duties of a minister's wife? It's all very well to have fun with that kind of a girl, but when it comes to choosing a helpmate for life, any sensible man would look elsewhere. Now, Helen—she's a perfect model for what I need!"

Mallory's voice, very faint, broke in upon this monologue.

"Elliott, will you do something for me?"

"Why, yes, Cousin Horace."

"Go away—go away—now, at once!"

"Why, yes, Cousin Horace, if you are tired."

He spoke with a good-humored tolerance of the whims of a sick man, which



"GO AWAY—GO AWAY NOW, AT ONCE!"

brought a snarl of protest from the man he was obliging.

V

WHEN he sat alone in the dark, Mallory was quite silent, gripping the arms of his chair. He was characterizing the eminently sensible and prudent remarks he had just heard in words whose blasting fury was not in the least modified by the fact that he had seriously considered using very similar arguments to urge upon his canny young kinsman the action that Elliott had taken of his own accord.

"Do young men have no blood in their veins nowadays?" he asked himself fiercely. "The complacent young puppy talked like a fat, cowardly merchant of fifty!"

And Annunziata, who could not hide the swiftest of her ever-changing moods, to what sure inferno of humiliating pity would her transparent misery betray her! He struck his fist upon the arm of his

chair and groaned aloud as he realized that it was misery from which no one could save her.

A rustle of silk and a half-sob answered him.

"Oh, what is it, Mr. Mallory? Are you in pain? Are you worse?"

He felt for the girl's hand in the dark, and carried the cold little fingers to his lips. She was trembling, and he suddenly felt that the truest balm that he could find for this unworldly spirit would be a sympathy as frank as her pathetically open sorrow.

"Yes, I am in pain, dear child—about you."

An indescribable warm exhalation of youth told him that she leaned closer to him.

"In pain about *me*?"

His heart contracted with a savage pang that took away his breath. He was losing his head, impotent, poverty-stricken scribbler that he was. He must speak quickly.

"I can't find words to tell you. I'm

afraid of offending you. I know it can do no good, but I want you to know that there is one man who—"

And then, with a rush, it was all over. He did not know whether it was Annunziata who was weeping for joy on his breast, or whether the sobs which shook him were his own. The stars reeled over the quiet sea, the earth rocked under him, he held Annunziata in his arms, felt her own about his neck, and heard her speaking words which came to him like something from a beautiful, incredible dream.

"What do you mean, Annunziata, what do you *mean*?" he cried.

"Oh, I thought you would never speak!" she reproached him. "I thought there must be something the matter—"

"But—but Elliott Whiteley?"

That he could remember the name seemed to prove to him that he was not in a golden delirium.

"That silly boy? Why, I refused him this morning!" said Annunziata.